

How to fly. And how not to...

Forget black runs – **Jonathan Thompson** takes on skiing's ultimate challenge at an Olympic training facility near Salt Lake City

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SKIING

Don't be afraid: you can't get hurt in the air," are the parting words of my coach, Matt, as I climb the ominous wooden staircase like a felon to the gallows. "Afraid" is a criminally overused word. Most of us are guilty of misapplying it to situations where, if we're honest, we're just a tad apprehensive. But at the top of that staircase, staring down the unforgiving, icy barrel of a 39-metre ski jump, afraid doesn't even begin to describe how I feel. This isn't just fear – it's unadulterated, leg-trembling, pant-wetting terror.

I try to switch off my brain and wait for Matt to ski to the landing area and give me the signal. A few seconds later he's waving like a brightly coloured beetle. Refusing to give my brain even a second to stop me, I tip my weight over the edge and suddenly I'm slicing straight down the tramlines at ferocious speed, with nothing whatsoever to prevent me being hurled into the freezing blue sky.

Eddie the Eagle Edwards has a lot to answer for. It was his against-all-odds assault on the 1988 Winter Olympics that – as an impressionable nine-year-old boy – first ignited my own zest for winter sports. So when, as a keen skier two decades later, I was offered the chance to experience some Olympic ski jumping myself I (ahem) jumped at the chance.

The Utah Olympic Park was built to stage the 2002 Salt Lake Games, but now functions as an enormous adrenaline amusement park. Members of the public can try everything from international-standard bobsleigh racing to Nordic ski jumping for beginners.

My coach for the three-day course – mornings only, afternoons were free for skiing the wonderful powder of neighbouring Park City – is former US skier and Olympic coach Matt Terwilligar. Despite the fact that he bears an uncanny resemblance to England's error-prone

goalkeeper David James, it's apparent that I'm in extremely safe hands.

I'm kitted out in a ridiculously tight, shiny blue jumpsuit that leaves nothing to the imagination (including the amount of American-sized portions I've been devouring in Park City). This tasty little number is teamed with a lightweight helmet and special jumping boots, which look like a cross between boxing trainers and clown shoes. I look like a low-rent, slightly pudgy Evel Knievel. Less like an eagle – more an enormous blue tit.

Each jump is measured in metres from take-off point to landing area, and prefixed with a "K" ("Kritical" point, in German). My first, the K2, may be a mere two metres, but with a pair of enormous, unwieldy 2.5-metre planks strapped to my feet, it's scary enough. I'm genuinely surprised when I'm in the air for less than a second, then land comfortably.

Soon, I've graduated to the five-metre jump, before Matt decides I'm ready to tackle the K10. He shows me how to improve my shape in the air, and by the end of my second lesson, I'm not only confident, but physically unblemished. The key to the whole process, I learn, is the "in-line" position, which ski-jumpers adopt as they speed towards take-off: knees bent low, back parallel to the snow and arms tucked in, palms outward.

As a state, Utah trades off the slogan "The Greatest Snow on Earth" and I have to hand it to them: the champagne powder fields here have to be skied to be believed. There are 11 major resorts within an hour's drive of Salt Lake City – and all benefit from the uniquely dry, fluffy powder created by the "Lake Effect" (essentially the addition of a large pinch of salt from the enormous lake). Post-lesson afternoons are spent riding through these cloud-like conditions, while evenings are enjoyed on Park City's throbbing Main Street – home not only to the Sundance film festival, but also an impressive array of pubs, bars and restaurants. As I'm in Utah, I even get into Polygamy. The local beer, that is.

Day three dawns and I'm ready to tackle the monster I've had half an eye on throughout: the K20. It's twice the height of anything I've jumped previ-

ously, but I concentrate hard on folding my body down into the in-line position, then exploding up at the take-off point. With a cross between a yell of terror and a whoop of delight, I'm off the lip and arcing through the air, then a few seconds later I feel snow under my skis again. I've done it. The blue tit has landed.

Matt skis over to me as I come to a halt in the landing area. "Well done," he says. "If you want, I reckon you could have a look at the K40. Fancy it?" And so I find myself climbing that long, steep wooden staircase, heart in mouth and skis on shoulder. The K40, while still a good 33 metres short of Eddie the Eagle's British record, is an official Olympic training jump. I consider and reject retreating down the staircase twice before slipping into the tramlines and, seconds later, gravity propels me faster than I've ever travelled on skis before. The lip appears, my legs straighten and suddenly I'm propelled, cartoon cannon-style, into the mountain sky. Form evaporates as I leave terra firma like an A-Team extra from an exploding jeep.

For a jubilant split second, I think I've landed it, then a combination of speed and appalling weight distribution send me thudding to the ground, from where I skid all the way down on my back, finishing with one leg in the car park.

My second crash is even worse. I jump higher – and land harder. In fact, my backside hits the snow with such force that I bounce and smack down heavily again, steaming down the hill so fast that my left ski is torn off and races ahead, flying off the landing area, across a road and into a cafe wall. The rest of me ends up in a pile of snow and pain, and I lie there, unable to speak or move, for a good couple of minutes.

But it isn't over yet. There's still time for one final jump. I know I don't have to do it. I know I *shouldn't* do it, but I know I *can* do it. Despite the growing pain in my lower back, I get a much better shape in the air this time and, keeping my weight over the front of my skis, I land it. I'm ecstatic and punch the air



before inadvertently crossing my planks and face-planting into the slope. I have a mouthful of snow and a small crowd of tourists are laughing, but I don't care. As far as I'm concerned, I've won.

My time is up. My derrière is in a world of trouble (later diagnosed as a fractured coccyx after an unbecoming episode with a doctor and a rubber glove), but it doesn't matter. I may be battered, but I looked fear in the eyes and launched myself towards it at considerable speed. Plus I got to walk away and tell the tale (admittedly with a limp).

After placing last at the 1988 Winter

Olympics, Eddie "the Eagle" Edwards said it wasn't about finishing on the podium – jumping was reward enough. After visiting Utah Olympic Park, I too had the painful experience of finishing, literally, on the bottom. But it was worth it for that incredible feeling of soaring off a mountain. I didn't need a medal either – just some industrial strength painkillers for the flight home and a slightly effeminate pink cushion to sit on at work for the next three weeks.

■ *Jonathan Thompson is Commissioning Editor of Men's Health magazine*

ESSENTIALS

Crystal Ski (crystalski.co.uk) offers a week in Park City, Utah, in the Yarrow Resort Hotel from £576 per head based on four sharing, including flights from Gatwick to Salt Lake City, transfers and breakfast. For more information on skiing in Utah, call 08456 020 574 or see utah.travel. The Park City Nordic Ski Club (nsfparkcity.org) operates a variety of jumping courses from as little as £25 per session. For more information on the park, visit olymparks.com.

MORE SKIING ADVENTURES

SWITZERLAND

46 Growing numbers of teenagers are eager to head off-piste, but there are few trips catering for them. Thankfully, the Ski Club of Great Britain offers breaks for ski-mad families, including a half-term off-piste week in the hardcore skiers' mecca, Andermatt.

■ **Children must be 13 or over (£1,295 half-board, 020 8410 2022; skifreshtracks.co.uk)**

KASHMIR

47 The Foreign Office advises against going there, but the pull of Himalayan powder and a lift that rises to almost 4,000m is drawing more adventurous skiers to Gulmarg. A trip there only costs the same as a week in a smart Alpine chalet.

■ **Indus (020 8901 7320; industours.co.uk) has a 10-day trip from £1255, with flights**

COLORADO

48 Olympic ski jumping is all well and good, but if you want to be down with the kids, you need freestyle skills for the park and half-pipe. The best place to learn is Woodward, a training centre at the resort of Copper Mountain.

■ **Full-day courses cost £121 (00 1888 350 1544; woodwardatcopper.com)**

MACEDONIA

49 Catskiing is the poor man's version of heliskiing – using a converted piste-basher to access virgin powder fields. It grew up in the Rocky Mountains, but now a pioneering company has brought it to Europe. Eskimo Freeride

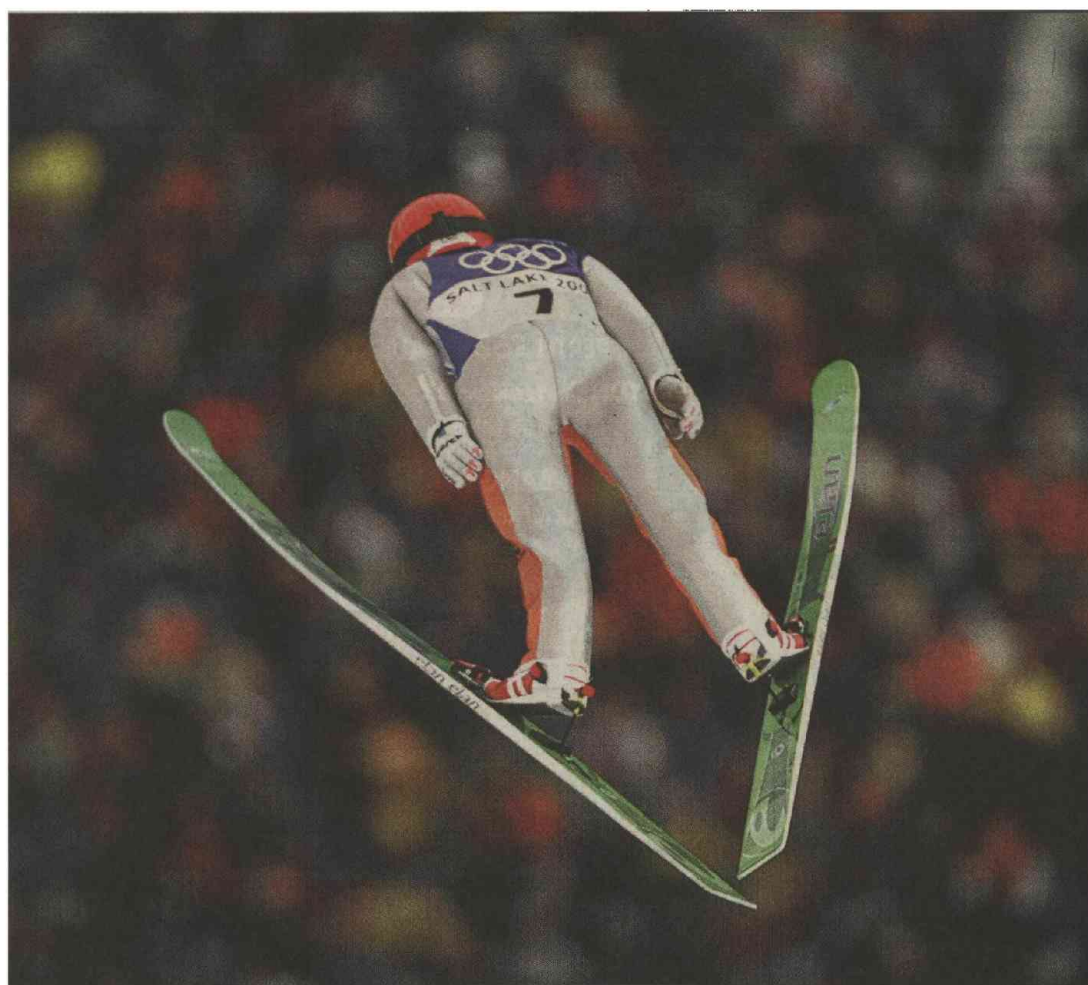
operates between December and April in Macedonia's Shar Planina range.

■ **Prices start at £150 a day, including guide fees, loan of safety equipment and half-board accommodation (eskimo-freeride.com)**

FRANCE-SWITZERLAND

50 Ski touring is enjoying a surge in popularity, and the most celebrated of all is the Haute Route, a week-long trip between two classic resorts, Chamonix in France and Zermatt in Switzerland. You need to have some touring experience.

■ **Wilderness Journeys (0131 625 6635; wildernessjourneys.com) offers an eight-night Haute Route expedition, including guiding, accommodation and most meals, for £1,195**



He climbs, he flies, he crashes:
Jonathan Thompson tackles the K40.
Left, a professional jumps at Utah.
Photographs by Mark Chilvers, Corbis